

Wilson, federal officials sign historic Delta pact

End seen to decades of water battles

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SACRAMENTO — Gov. Pete Wilson and top federal officials signed a historic environmental agreement Thursday that experts predicted would bring an end to decades of political and legal battles over the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the source of irrigation water for thousands of acres of Kern County farm land.

"This is a major victory, I think, for all water users in California,"

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Wilson said at a press conference crowded with state and federal officials and representatives of major water interests, all seeking a share of credit for the historic agreement.

"The war is over at long last," said U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, whose federal agencies just a year ago were poised to impose environmental standards that would

have required farmers to give up twice the amount of water called for under the pact.

Officials of the Kern County Water Agency and other farm water officials were not quite so effusive, noting that some major potential conflicts remain to be settled.

"Clearly, great strides have been made with this," said Tom Clark, manager of the KCWA, which buys one-fourth of the water pumped from the Delta by the State Water

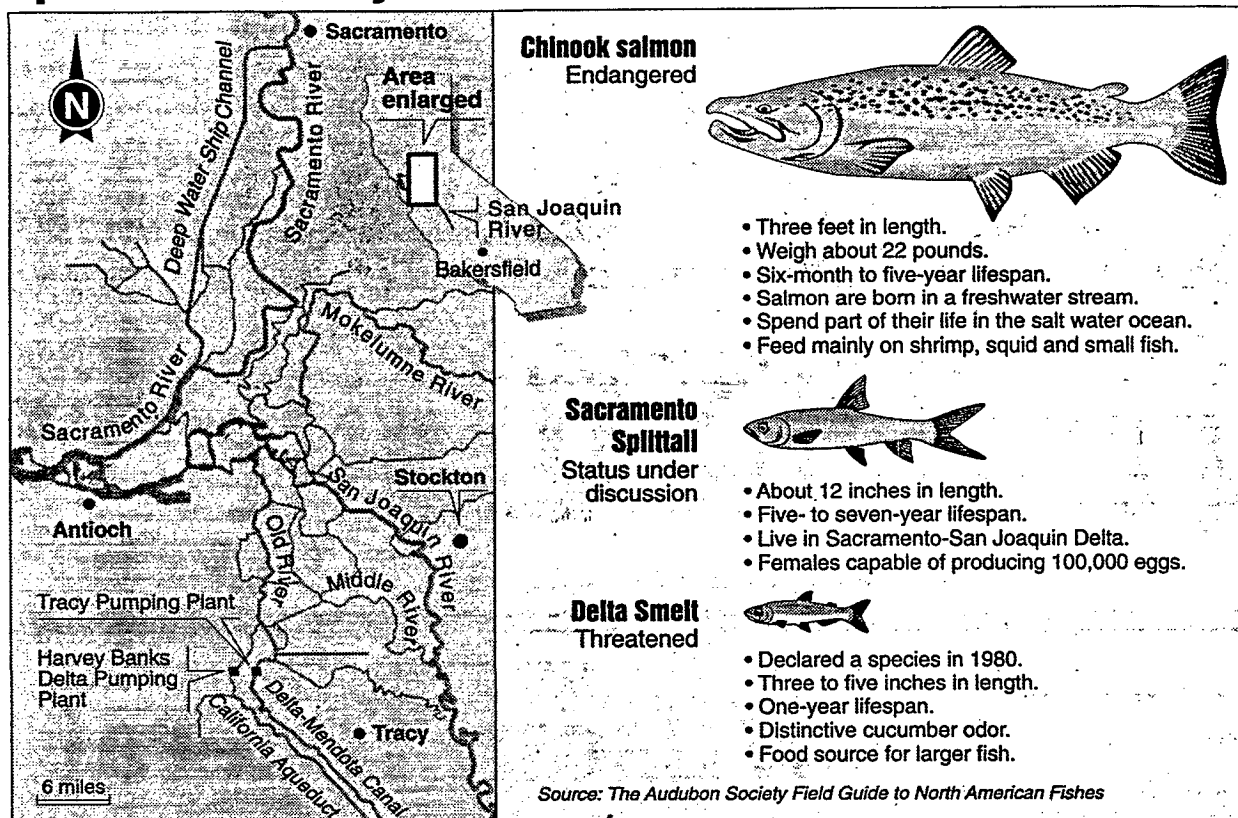
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Highlights of Delta agreement

- **WATER REQUIREMENTS:** In drought years, about 1.1 million acre-feet of fresh water must flow through the Delta and out to sea to maintain water quality. For years with more rainfall, the requirements go down to an estimated 400,000 acre-feet in normal and wet years.
- **SHELF LIFE:** The agreement is good for at least three years.
- **ENDANGERED SPECIES:** Federal environmental agencies agreed not to list any more fish as threatened or endangered except under "unforeseen circumstances." But if new species are listed and they require additional fresh water, the federal government has agreed to buy the water on the open market, and not take it out of allocations for the two major projects. Already listed are the endangered winter-run chinook salmon and threatened delta smelt. At the last moment, officials agreed not to list a third species, the Sacramento splittail. Discussions about the splittail will continue, but if it is listed, it is not expected to require additional water.
- **PUMPING RESTRICTIONS:** In general, pumping by the two projects will not be halted because endangered fish are being drawn toward the intakes or because the pumps are reversing the normal flow of streams.
- **FRIANT DAM:** The agreement does not affect the Friant Dam on the San Joaquin River, which is the source of all the Central Valley Project water for Kern County irrigation districts.

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Species covered by Delta water standards



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DELTA: Offers 'certainty going into dry years'

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Project. "Whether or not peace has broken out all over is going to depend on how people conduct themselves from now on."

Biggest victory in the accord for Kern County farmers, Clark said, is its predictable limit on the amount of water that can be taken away from farmers to protect water quality and endangered fish in the Delta and adjacent San Francisco Bay.

Over the last few years, the rising amount of water required for environmental purposes has made crop planning as risky as a trip to Las Vegas, many growers say.

"It has given us certainty going into these dry years, which is crucial for Kern County agriculture," Clark said.

Officials said the pact will limit the amount of water required for environmental purposes in the Delta to an estimated 1.1 million acre feet in dry years, decreasing to about 400,000 acre feet in normal rainfall years.

This year alone, Clark said, 1.4 million acre feet of water was not pumped from the Delta by the state project and the federal Central Valley Project because of endangered species requirements.

For comparison, the state project supplies about 4.2 million acre feet in a normal year, and KCWA's full entitlement is about 1.1 million acre feet.

Without the agreement, agriculture could have faced the loss of far more water. Just a year ago, the

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed Delta standards that could have required up to 2.3 million acre feet of water in drought years, said David R. Schuster, a consultant who represented KCWA in the negotiations.

Another key provision, Clark and other farm water officials noted, is that federal environmental agencies have agreed not to list any more Delta fish species as threatened or endangered, at least for the foreseeable future.

But if additional water is required for a newly listed species, or for existing threatened and endangered fish, the federal government has agreed to buy the water, rather than require the state and federal projects to give it up.

Final terms of the historic agreement were hammered out during months of negotiations, even up until early Wednesday evening. They involved representatives of all the major players in California's long-running water wars: agricultural and urban water agencies, environmental organizations and state and federal water and environmental officials.

In the end, the basic framework for the agreement was a proposal developed over the last few months by a coalition of agricultural and urban water agencies, in which KCWA played a key role.